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ABSTRACT

A lack of efficiency and effectiveness among many students today in either oral or silent reading, a major mode of modern communication, is cited. It is reasoned that constructive steps must be taken toward improving reading abilities in both the high schools and colleges. The author refers specifically to steps that should be taken in Ohio by the Ohio College Association. Five modern myths concerning reading that have contributed to the indifference being shown toward reading in secondary schools are reviewed and refuted. Reading is not a unitary, simple, closed process; there are serious reading problems in high school and college; modern visual and auditory media have not supplanted the need for reading skills; speed reading does not solve the "volume problem" nor does it assist serious study; and the public will support reading programs. A bibliography is included. (NH)

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Eagles or Ostriches: A Question of Reading in Secondary and Higher Education

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As every critical observer knows, the modern world is filled with demands and urgent needs to communicate efficiently and effectively. That is our purpose here, today. But we also know that there is a distinct difference between a demand or need for communication and ability to respond satisfactorily, regardless of the mode of communication. Thus, it is appropriate for us all to consider the communication arts from time to time with an eye toward assessing whether or not they are being adequately learned and used by members of--at least--the educated segments of society.

My gross concern today, is that there is a growing body of evidence, derived from graded, high school, and college levels of education, that a great many students are not efficient and effective in either oral or silent reading--a major mode of modern communication.

Since the Ohio College Association is vitally concerned with the smooth transition of high school students from secondary to higher education and the success of those students in colleges or universities, it seems quite appropriate for the OCA to consider the state of the art of reading on both the secondary and higher education levels, for reading is a major strategy for learning and continued progress in higher education in Ohio.

If you are willing to bear with me, it is my refined intention to persuade you that you ought to get involved in doing some constructive acts toward improving reading abilities in both the high schools and colleges of the State of Ohio. Let me begin my recitation of reasons by reviewing a few bits of mythology in reading today.

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Modern Myths

In the first place, it is a "modern myth" that reading is a unitary, simple and somewhat closed process; and, therefore, can be taught and learned completely by normal and bright children in the early elementary grades. As sophisticated studies by Robinson (1), Gagon (2), Stauffer (3), Sartain (4), and Holmes and Singer (5) point out, (to name only a few) the mythology on this point is traumatic. If one looks closely at reading, under the definition of "the efficient and effective taking of meanings", it should be obvious that reading is not only a series of processes--involving such devices of reasoning as analysis and synthesis--but also multi-factoral, multi-contextual, multi-environmental, multi-sensory, and multi-ethnic as related to societal norms of behavior.

Holmes and Singer, for example, found in their extensive linguistic sub-strata factor analysis of rate and power in reading that no fewer than 37 distinct linguistic factors are involved in power of reading alone (6), and 56 factors account for only 75% of both power and rate combined. They go on to say that:

> "It is strikingly apparent that power of reading is greatly dependent upon a knowledge of words and the concepts that they symbolize." (7)

They isolate such general factors as range of information, discrimination of pitches, knowledge of spatial relations, figure and ground perception, musicality, abilities with homonyms, analogies, reasoning powers, and auding. They also draw a distinction between learning to read and reading to learn. Such a powerful analysis is a far cry from the homely and over-simplifying saying,"Teach 'em phonics (however defined) and they'll get along okay."

Holmes and Singer, however, do not have the "whole bag" either. Any linguist--after acknowledging the centrality of knowledge of language to the mastery of reading--will then help you to realize that the English language, at least, is almost frighteningly complex when explored in depth. Vocabulary alone has all sorts of structural devices which a reader must manipulate, including intentional prefixes, grammatical suffixes, infixes, roots and stems, elliptical forms, rhymes, reversals, foreign elements, signs of the diminutive, agent signs, diacritics, et cetera. The problems multiply under uses of pitches, stresses, and junctures and reference to history--where students must deal with obsolete, archaic, and allusive forms.

Syntax is also a jungle for the reader, for not only must he manage regular and inverted orders--which can run into thousands of patterns--but also poetic forms, elliptical elements, vast numbers of styling devices and cumulative melodies. To those he must add continuity and discontinuity as devices and all manners of ordination, e.g. coordination, disjunction, subordination, superordination, and exclusion-inclusion in multiplied thousands of referential categories.

Regarding the impossibility of mastering mature reading skills in the pre-school or elementary years, Philip Phenix explicates the necessities for context and life experiences as he says:

> "There is no sense to questions about the meaning of a word in general. ---The meaning--must always be determined by reference to its syntactics and semantics, that is, to the kinds of sentences in which its use is appropriate (and inappropriate) and to the sorts of experiences to which it is (and is not) relevant." (8)

With some justification, the pre-school and elementary years are so busy teaching alphabetic principles, orthographic-phonic variants, and word analysis skills that they seldom, if ever, get around to words in the

context of idiomatic sentences and experiences requiring evaluations of relevance. And when and where in the elementary grades do students consciously work with and for mastery of such modifying elements as diminutives, agent signs, complements, ellipses, voices, moods, inversions, disjunctions, compressions, embellishments, serials, and parallels into the hundreds of syntatics devices; let alone styles and semantic devices?

In light of the richness of devices in the language, it is patently obvious that mastery of reading strategies and devices of meaning will not be accomplished within the average person's lifetime; even though each graded school level does present opportunities to control a few more. What, then, can a person mean who says, "You ought to learn to read in grade school"? Surely, he can only mean bare-bones beginnings; for the extended systems of sounds, forms, orders, and meanings in English are incredibly complex when interacting in sophisticated ways. (9)

And then you dare to tell me that it is reasonable to assume that early grade school children should master the strategies and problems of critical or depth reading to such extent that they should be able to apply dimensional understandings to everyday arts of politics and living. The idea is absurd. Learning to read with masterful skill is a life-long project, especially when two other well-known facts are considered: (1) readiness of both psychic and social character, and (2) opportunity of both environmental and motivational essence. As the works of Piaget (10) and others have repeatedly demonstrated, the maturational characteristics of the mind must be "right" for mastery of certain perceptions and concepts. To grasp the "themes" of War and Peace or Moby Dick is not a beginning, graded-school task. In fact, it eludes many of the brightest collegiate minds. Nor are the allusions of Wordsworth's stanzaic models simple and easily attached. And what does

the student do for "readiness" who springs from the non-verbal, deprived, or socially-rejected environment? Because he is in high school or college with his D average under an open admissions policy--does he suddenly become ready? Perhaps the point is made.

A second major myth is that there is no serious problem in high school or college. Well--I don't know what you might call serious; but if one child with collegiate potential cannot go to college because of deficiencies in reading, I consider that serious.

Let me draw upon a few recent data from The University of Toledo alone to show that such inability is a fact of life relevant to a large portion of the current high school graduating classes of the State of Ohio. Of the entering freshman class of 1969-70, referrals from English classes alone for remedial instruction constituted some 10% of the class. In addition, 20-25% of the students registered in the Community and Technical College sought or were requested to take remedial or developmental reading as a non-credit course to assist progress. Our Community and Technical College staff reports approximately 100 per quarter seriously handicapped. What do yours? Furthermore, recent national surveys by the U.S. Office of Education and The National Council of Teachers of English show that--depending upon geographic area--some 15% of most high school graduating classes read both orally and silently with absolutely minimal proficiency, if at all, and another 30 to 40% are below acceptable levels for the 12th grade. (11) It has become a truism in education that (even on the college level) any heterogeneous mixture of students will yield at least seven disparate grade levels of reading ability, thus bringing into critical focus the concept of clinical referral for those who read two grade levels below norm. Isn't the right to read part of both the high school

and college students' heritage? Or is Commissioner Allen right--that it belongs mostly to elementary school children? (12) I have a feeling that leadership for the nation will never be supplied by grade school children, and very few of them burn and loot cities.

But the available evidence not only shows a need for attention to reading on both high school and college levels but it also points out our serious lack of data regarding exactly where we are in reading in Ohio. As an example, I recently asked the State Department of Education to supply me with data sufficient to answer the following seven questions about secondary reading in Ohio:

1. What is the current, average reading ability of high school students in Ohio, as measured by standardized instruments, for grade levels 9, 10, 11, and 12? (e.g. from Ohio Survey)

2. Which reading tests are given regularly, state-wide to determine efficiency (ability) in reading of high school students?

3. Are rate and comprehension tests the only, or the standard tests; or are other types of reading tests given?

4. What are the ranges (outer-limits) of reading abilities among high school students in Ohio, as measured by standardized instruments, for grade levels 9, 10, 11, and 12?

5. What has been done state-wide in Ohio within the last five years to upgrade student reading abilities in high school grades 9-12?

6. What do current test data show about differences in reading ability between culturally advantaged and culturally disadvantaged students in grades 9-12?

7. What are the greatest reading needs of high school students in grades 9-12 as revealed by recent test data?

I received the following data by way of reply:

1. There are slightly fewer than 50% of Ohio's 1,250 secondary schools which have <u>any kind</u> of reading program, including developmental, remedial, or corrective frames-of-reference.

2. There are at least six programs which might be cited as models--with various operational philosophies.

3. There is a wide range of diagnostic tests used in those 600 plus programs, among which heavy reliance is placed upon the standardized Nelson-Denny and teacher-made instruments or anecdotals.

4. No statistics are available for Ohio's range (of reading abilities in grades 9-12), typically from 2nd to 14th grades.

5. No comparisons have been made of performances between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

6. Most of the government title programs in reading are remedial or corrective in character (some--in five years). (That should say something.)

7. There is a slight recognition by a few that subject content area teachers must be involved in the teaching of reading.

8. Ohio has established a <u>Right to Read Commission</u> to implement USOE Commissioner Allen's mandate that all children (essentially elementary) will learn to read in the '70's.

9. There is only <u>hope</u> of a K-12 developmental program state-wide.

10. Many teachers report students in high school having a difficult time reading in the content areas. (14)

If all of the information contained in the reply is accurate (and I have no indication whatsoever that it isn't), it sketches in dramatic language a sorry state of awareness of the true conditions of reading in the State of Ohio, for it says nothing whatsoever of the <u>adequacy</u> of particular diagnoses, comparative effectiveness of options in instruction and

learning, criteria for levels of expectation or effectiveness, relative performances in subject disciplines, et cetera. In other words--allowing justice due for the noble efforts put forward to date--it appears that reading in Ohio is flying blind or at best "catch-as-catch-can."

It is little wonder, however, that secondary schools are relatively indifferent to reading; only a handful of teachers in the secondary schools have ever had a single course in the teaching of reading--let alone become expert at the job. (15) The state certification standards do not require it for English teachers. In addition, if the ISCPET study in Illinois is representative, most English teachers consider the usually analytic renderings of literature all the reading development necessary. (16) This of course, is foolish in light of the nature of language. And college and university professors simply assume reading expertise and make almost no effort whatsoever to diagnose or do anything about student deficiencies.

Arno Bellack of the USOE is correct in his essay on issues and problems in national assessment of education, for after he frames the role of the Federal Government in influencing the direction of national educational policies, he then remarks:

> "We need more accurate information about what is going on in the schools. We need to identify aspects of the instructional program in which improvement is needed." (17)

He includes reading on all levels in his references, for he goes on to report that many organizations are now at work proposing educational objectives for all levels and disiplinary areas of American education.

The National Education Association's "Project on Instruction" was more direct about the need for attention to reading at all levels and stated flatly that reading skills are central to development of academic competence

and excellence. (18) As Bellack, the NEA group specified "reading and language arts" as one of the seven "important educational tasks of the modern school." (19)

If it is such, how can a state of the size and importance of Ohio not feel compelled to have extensive data on conditions of reading?

But there are other myths abroad about reading. Another of the insidious ones is that modern visual and auditory media are rapidly supplanting reading skills in the world. Oh? Has man lost his sense of history? Is he denying his desire to be remembered? Is he living in that close a proximity? I think not. Men still insist upon being recorded, and the mail volume grows daily around the world. Furthermore, in a recent article on reading in secondary schools entitled, "Heads Out of the Sand," Dwight L. Burton, a nationally-known professor of English curriculum from the University of Florida, suggested that there is a paradox in modern communications media regarding the status of reading. He says:

> "The paradox in the modern communication and entertainment scene lies in the fact that reading becomes more and more, rather than less and less, important with the constant expansion of other modes of communication and resultant vicarious experience." (20)

He rebuttals the idea that mass media are supplanting the importance of reading and then cites six "unique functions of reading" identified by Ralph Preston (21) and four "advantages of reading over motion pictures and radio" specified by Nila B. Smith (22). He goes on to produce quantities of statistics about how many copies of various popular works have been sold recently, including those by Dr. Spock and Star Kist Tuna's favorite recipes. The central thesis of his persuasive article is that the continuing academic and social successes of the vast majority of junior and senior high school

students today and in the future are and will be predicated upon their abilities to read efficiently and with effective applications. He persuades with data.

My refined intention today is to persuade with reasons. It might also be instructive to check the circulation figures of publishing houses and the ALA.

Still another myth is that speeded reading is what is needed in society and that it will somehow give great assistance in serious study and "bail us out" of the volume problem. Here again the mythology is profound.

In the first place, the astronomical claims made by some speed reading enthusiasts are suicidal in their granduer. As an illustration, I have a newspaper clipping of a young man in Texas who claimed to read 23,000 words per minute. Have you even the slightest idea how many pages that means and the mechanical problems involved? Well--at 300 words per page, you will have 77. That means he would have had to turn a page, read 1 1/6 pages of text and prepare to turn the next page all in 1 1/6 seconds. Even the fast copy cameras we have would be hard pressed to do that in book form. There is also a great difference between skimming to locate topics of relevance and reading to take meanings which will be mulled in the mind.

Furthermore, the extensive eye-camera studies of the Educational Development Laboratories--and particularly Westover (23), Tinker (24), and Taylor (25)--establish clinically that the eye just cannot perceive and record 8- to 12-point type in five-inch lines while the eyes are moving--let alone at such rates. About the best the eyes can do is "match" a particular configuration as a gestalt impression while in a split-moment

of rest. And even the best college readers seldom read for recall and study purposes at over 300 words per minute or in spans greater than 1 3/4 inches.

Usually the "speed" boys and girls sell their wares and services under such loosely-worded claims that they can "weasel out" through the semantic space in the definitions. Such "fast-buck" approaches usually do not help either high school or college readers, however, over the long haul.

The last myth for today is that the public will not support reading programs in the schools. This contention is sheer nonsense. The public I know--including ourselves--is for what children and youth need for success. If reading programs are needed, the public will "go" for them. However, that is not really the problem. It lies in the vested realms of ego. "What are we willing to give up to get better efficiency in basic, life skills?" That is the central question. The mythology here is that educators can keep adding without setting priorities and subtracting for means relative to worthy ends.

In 1956, Myron Lieberman, in his book, Education as a Profession, (27) presented much evidence that the American public is in substantial agreement that the development of critical thinking and effective communication, are two central purposes of all education. How can critical thinking and effective communication be effected within a highly verbal society oriented toward print without dimensional skills in reading? Furthermore, the NEA's Educational Policies Commission stated directly in 1961 (28) that the major purpose of education in the United States is to learn to think critically. Does either the high school or the college student think critically from the dry husks of his limited experience? Or does he fill with lush readings and then exercise full and well-fed powers?

There is also a growing body of evidence that those pupils who have the greatest control over language are the ones who use it best to express supposition, hypothesis, conditions, and tentativeness in statements. (29) Certainly, high school students should do better in colleges if they were more tentative and less absolute. Reading skills can help make them so. And anyone who has waded through the conditioned prose of William Faulkner or James Gould Cozzens will know what I mean.

Let's set our priorities in order in high schools and colleges. Maybe they all do not need three years of math, sciences, and foreign languages.

Possibilities for Action

Let me return at this point to my thesis and contention. If the Ohio College Association wants a significant and timely cause, let it get involved in Ohio not with such necessary but peripheral administrative arrangements as publications about college entrance requirements and public relations gimmicks to sell students upon the "Wonderful World of Ohio"--but with solutions to the basic problem of many splendid young men and women in high schools and colleges who have been short-changed and crippled in academia over the years by not achieving adequate skills in reading. Perhaps, then, the published entrance requirements will become meaningful to more then 40% of the literati.

And there are positive steps that OCA can take almost immediately. Let me suggest the following:

1. OCA can launch a study of reading in Ohio's secondary and higher schools aimed at getting factual data.

2. Pressure can be brought to bear upon certification standards for teachers to have course work in the teaching of reading practices and development of programs.

3. Screening procedures for reading ability can be introduced into all college and university admission processes to identify those admitees with serious reading problems.

4. Teacher education programs can be reviewed with an eye toward assisting future teachers with reading problems.

5. All secondary schools can be urged to implement realistic and comprehensive developmental reading programs K-12.

6. Graduate programs in the state can be reviewed with intent to guarantee sound training programs in reading, readily available to all who want them.

7. Colleges and universities can be urged to hold institutes and workshops to assist development of reading expertise in teachers and professors from all levels.

In conclusion, let me say that it is very easy for professors and college administrators to turn away from the reading needs at the high school and college levels and blame teachers and administrators in lateral areas (such as the State Department) or earlier levels (such as the grade schools). But that is not only educational hypocrisy, it is the ostrich stance. It is a fact of life that relative illiterates do not earn good wages, pay high taxes, support cultural diversities, or contribute significantly to aesthetic enterprises and great debates in societies. Highly literate persons do. It seems to me, therefore, that colleges and universities should strive with considerable rigor to see that both lower and higher schools teach extensive literacy as a primary reason for existence.

Footnotes

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5. J.A. Holmes and H. Singer. Speed and Power of Reading in High School, USOE Cooperative Research Monograph No. 14 (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1966), 183 pp.

6. J.A. Holmes. "Speed, Comprehension and Power in Reading," Problems, Programs and Projects in College-Adult Reading, 11th Yearbook of the National Conference (1962), 6-14; in R. Karlin (ed.) Teaching Reading in High School (New York: Bobbs-Merril, 1969), 71-77.

7. Ibid. 74.

8. Philip Phenix. "Curriculum and the Analysis of Language," Language and Meaning (Washington, D.C.: ASCD, 1966), 33.

9. See H.A. Gleason. An Introduction to Descriptive Linguistics, Revised (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961).

10. See Jean Piaget. The Language and Thought of the Child. TR. (New York: Meridian Books, 1957).

11. See studies listed in ERIC-CRIER and publications of the NCTE as well as the Bulletins of the USOE-HEW.

12. See announcement by Commissioner Allen, USOE-HEW, regarding the "Right to Read Commission," 1969. See Yearbook 1970, Encyclopedia Britannica.

13. In letter from G. Ernst Giesecke to J.H. McElhaney, Executive Director of the Ohio College Association (February 13, 1970).

14. In letter to J.H. McElhaney, Executive Director of the OCA, from Carol O'Connell, State of Ohio Department of Education (March 4, 1970).

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17. Arno A. Bellack. "The National Assessment of Educational Progress: Issues and Problems" in A.M. Knoll (ed.) Issues in American Education (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 43-56.

18. D.M. Fraser (ed.). Deciding What to Teach, Project on Instruction (Washington, D.C.: NEA, 1963), 264 pp.

19. Bellack. op. cit., 50.

20. D. Burton. "Heads Out of the Sand: Secondary Schools Face the Challenge of Reading," The Educational Forum, XXIV (March 1960), 285-293; in Karlin, op. cit., 3.

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25. E.A. Taylor. "The Fundamental Reading Skill," Journal of Developmental Reading, I (Summer 1958), 21-30.

26. See articles in the Journal of Reading.

27. Myron Lieberman. Education As a Profession (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1956).

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